

## **Movement and Materiality: Mobile Cores and the Archaeology of Political Boundaries**

Henry P. Colburn and Ryan C. Hughes

---

*Interdepartmental Program in Classical Art and Archaeology, University of Michigan*  
*henrycolburn@umich.edu; rchughes@umich.edu*

Of all the boundaries defined by archaeologists, political boundaries are among the most important. Political boundaries are defined by their relationships with certain cores, and represent the furthest extent of a core's political, administrative or military control of territory. As a result they are frequently utilised by archaeologists as proxies for the expansion, consolidation and collapse of individual polities (Parker 2006: 83–85). At the same time they are among the most difficult of boundaries to define archaeologically. Traditionally such boundaries have been defined in two ways: theoretical approaches that model boundaries conjecturally based on reasoned assumptions concerning cultural processes (e.g. Thiessen polygons), and materially based approaches that locate boundaries according to the presence or absence of certain materials (e.g. walls, ditches or discontinuities in the distribution of culturally relevant assemblages).

More recent approaches to boundaries have moved away from seeing them as definitive limits defined by geographic or cultural discontinuities and have instead identified boundary zones in which cultural processes linked to different cores interact (e.g. Parker 2006). Though this work has done much to advance our understanding of cultural interaction, these approaches still require the clear definition of political boundaries.

The inadequacy of current archaeological methods for defining political boundaries is especially evident in the case of peer polity interaction, and its archaeological similarity to itinerant kingship. The peer polity interaction model explains the presence of 'structural homologues' among politically independent polities of similar size and territorial extent as a result of interaction between them (Renfrew 1986). Itinerant kingship, on the other hand, is a political institution in which a ruler's control of his domain is achieved through his repeated presence in various locations throughout that domain (Geertz 1983: 121–146). These are entirely different concepts from one another, but for the purposes of this paper their major difference is the presence of inter-group political boundaries in the case of peer polities, and the absence thereof in the case of itinerant kingship. In many cases these boundaries are hypothesized on the basis of other material evidence (e.g. Renfrew and Cherry 1986). Yet, as we shall argue, in many cases this same evidence could be interpreted not as the remains of several independent interacting polities, but rather of a politically unified domain ruled by means of itinerant kingship. In most cases the domains of itinerant rulers are comprised of formerly independent polities, and the boundaries between these polities defined by social, economic and cultural processes remain intact after unification. Using the correlates of these processes to define political boundaries results in a flawed and incomplete picture of political processes. If this is indeed the case, political boundaries based on current theory are essentially meaningless.

This paper uses historical examples of itinerant kingship from Hawai'i, the Achaemenid Persian Empire, and Early Mediaeval Germany to demonstrate the difficulties inherent in distinguishing between peer polities and itinerant kingship. In each of these examples the itinerant kingship is

known primarily from historical sources, but is poorly understood in the archaeological record. We argue that each has a material signature that can be interpreted in various ways, chief among these being peer polity interaction. We present a fourth example, from the Chalcolithic Negev in Israel, which has been identified as an example of peer polity interaction, but which nevertheless features a remarkably similar material signature to the first three.

### **Itinerant Kingship and Peer Polities**

The peer polity interaction model seeks to explain the presence of 'structural homologies' among politically independent polities as the result of three kinds of interaction between them, namely competition (including both warfare and emulation), transmission and adoption of innovation and symbolic vocabularies, and exchange of goods (Renfrew 1986). These homologies can include a wide range of things, from physical features such as architecture and city planning to ideas such as religious beliefs and political institutions. More importantly, their presence cannot be attributed to the influence or power of a single centre. (For the purposes of this paper, 'core' refers to the focal point of political activity, and 'centre' to the focal point of regional processes.) Hence, one common feature of this model is the absence of a centralised settlement hierarchy focused on a single centre, and it is often applied to ancient regions where an appropriate core appears to be lacking. In addition to the distinct settlement pattern, structural homologies appear in the archaeological record in a number of ways, such as similarities between sites in terms of the scale; style and nature of monumental architecture; the use of a common written language, for monumental inscriptions and record keeping, and the utilisation of similar iconographies in both public and private contexts. In essence, peer polities are characterised by even spatial distribution of sites and the presence of structural homologies. Furthermore, it is especially important to note that because peer polities are regarded as politically independent, archaeologists generally seek to define political boundaries between them (e.g. Renfrew and Cherry 1986).

Itinerant kingship is a form of political institution in which the ruler governs his domain by means of his personal presence in various parts of it, usually achieved through regular travel (Geertz 1983: 121–146). The nature of this travel can vary considerably, ranging from long stays at a limited number of sites, to rapid, almost constant movement. Typically it is a means of ruling decentralised regions, and the ruler often utilises local institutions in various places to legitimise his rule and consolidate his power. At the same time, however, the ruler's preeminence causes whatever geographic location he is at to become a focal point for the domain, as actions that occur at that location affect the domain as a whole. In essence, the itinerant ruler can become a core unto himself. Since certain aspects of political cores are physically incapable of moving with the ruler, these aspects become reduplicated throughout the ruler's domain, and some of these aspects can be detected archaeologically. Geographic locations that are frequently visited by the ruler or visited for long periods of time begin to show some of the correlates of cores. So, if the archaeological correlates of ranked societies (i.e. chiefdoms and states) include monumental constructions, regional hierarchy of settlement patterns, and temples (Matthews 2003: 96), in the case of itinerant kingship we would expect these correlates to be duplicated at important locations throughout the polity, to reflect the ruler's movements. This duplication in turn creates the appearance of multiple cores. In some cases these cores are pre-existing centres, and visited by the ruler for that very reason. In other cases they become so as a result of the ruler's visits.

These archaeological correlates of itinerant kingship create a material signature similar to the structural homologies that are characteristic of peer polity interaction. Competition in the form of emulation, especially on the part of local elites, can as easily occur among geographically distinct political subunits of a larger polity (such as cities) as it can between smaller independent polities (Ma 2003). Some degree of emulation may also occur as a result of similarities in infrastructure, such as monumental, civic or cultic spaces. A ruler holding court often requires a specific space in which to do so, and this space is often monumental and typically reflects the ritual practice associated with the ruler. This too can have the

same appearance as competition between polities in the form of emulation. The adoption of similar symbolic vocabularies, whether they be languages or iconographic programmes, can as easily be mandated from a central authority as be the result of peer polity interaction. Finally, movement of goods is often facilitated by, or is the result of, the imposition of tribute (Bang 2008: 113–121). With an itinerant ruler tribute has the potential to end up wherever the ruler might be, especially if he is travelling at the head of an army or taking up long-term residence in various places. Indeed, in many cases one of the purposes of itinerant kingship is for the ruler to collect tribute without physically moving it.

The resemblance between the structural homologies that occur as a result of peer polity interaction and those that occur as a result of itinerant kingship is not merely superficial. In both cases these homologies reflect the development of similar institutions, both the establishment of new ones and the transformation of old ones. This resemblance belies the fundamental difference between these two concepts: itinerant kingship is a political phenomenon, whereas peer polity interaction is a largely (though not exclusively) cultural process. Their comparability resides only in their similarity in the archaeological record. Thus they are not alternatives or mutually exclusive by any means. In fact, in many cases itinerant kingship can arise from the types of interaction described in the peer polity interaction model. Moreover, there is no reason the type of elite competition in the form of emulation characteristic of peer polities would necessarily cease in an itinerant kingship.

The following four case studies demonstrate the difficulty in distinguishing between peer polities and itinerant kingship by archaeological means alone. The first three are historically known examples of itinerant kingship that present a material signature that could, in the absence of historical sources, be identified as peer polity interaction. The fourth case is an example of peer polity interaction in prehistory whose material signature is essentially the same as that of the previous three cases.

## Case Studies

### *Hawai'i*

At the moment of first contact with Europe, Hawaiian chiefs controlled major agricultural facilities that included both irrigation complexes and dryland fields. Common farmers worked plots allotted to them in exchange for their *corvée* labour, and a lion's share of the produce, which chiefs used to carry out their political ambitions (Earle 1997: 75–89). Therefore, the economy of contact Hawai'i was segmentary with separate systems focused on local chiefs (*ali'i*). Earle has argued that chiefs competed over 'improved productive facilities' and access to labour rather than territorial expansion (1997: 132). This elite competition manifests itself in the open warfare, often said to characterise Hawaiian chiefdoms. Thus, the unification of the Hawaiian islands by Kamehameha in AD 1810 was initially achieved by several wars of conquest. Born to the nephew of the *ali'i ai moku* (paramount chief) of the 'big island' of Hawai'i between 1748 and 1761, Kamehameha himself became *ali'i ai moku* in 1788 after a bloody civil war against two of his cousins (Flannery 1999: 11–12). A mere two years after gaining control of the 'big island', Kamehameha set out to conquer the remaining islands in the Hawaiian chain. As the islands fell under his control, internecine conflict continued up until the acquisition of Kaua'i, the smallest of the four main islands of the chain. Without the aid of an integrated economy or political structure, Kamehameha consolidated his rule through modifications to customary administration, controlling trade with Europeans, and most importantly, reducing the size of the military over time (D'Arcy 2003). The strong coalitions he formed with the *ali'i* of the various islands formed the backbone of Kamehameha's power. To ensure loyalty and reduce the possibility of rebellion, he divided the islands amongst his high chiefs. For at least the next two years, Kamehameha continued to travel between the islands visiting his high chiefs and cementing their allegiance.

Though the construction of monuments associated with chiefly rule was noted in the period following Cook's arrival in 1778, archaeological investigations show that the intensity of this activity peaked between AD

1200–1400 and not during Kamehameha's reign (Kolb 1994). Following this period, chiefs focused their efforts on agricultural intensification as a form of differentiation. Earle has argued this switch provided the preconditions necessary to allow the process of unification seen at contact (1997: 75–89). This unification saw little if any change in the material patterns found at sites on the various islands. If any changes can be found it would be in the intensification of agricultural production and the increase in European goods, which could be argued to have been a result of European contact and not the integrative effects of itinerate kingship. Moreover, the markers of increased stratification (i.e. greater labour investment in burial, increased differentiation in elite houses and monumental construction) were not noticeably changed by Hawaiian unification.

### *Achaemenid Persian Empire*

Itinerant kingship in the Achaemenid Persian Empire (c. 550–330 BC) is attested both by Greek authors and in cuneiform administrative tablets excavated at Persepolis. The Persian Great King regularly travelled between the cities of Persepolis, Susa and Ecbatana in southwestern Iran, and Babylon in Mesopotamia (Tuplin 1998). This circuit served two purposes. Firstly, the Great King deliberately utilised older Near Eastern royal ideologies as part of his own claim to legitimacy (Root 2000). The other three cities, Susa, Ecbatana, and Babylon, were all capitals of previous empires, and the Great King's yearly presence at each both legitimised his kingship by identifying it with past kings, and demonstrated his dominion over these areas. Secondly, Mesopotamia was capable of producing enough grain to support the imperial core, including a standing army. Accordingly, the Great King retained some degree of personal oversight over the region and thereby eliminated any dependence on other power individuals in the empire, such as provincial governors. The Great King practiced a form of itinerant kingship that prioritised sites of great ideological and economic significance; he was rarely absent from any of these sites for more than a year unless he was away on campaign.

The primary archaeological manifestation of the Great King's presence in each of these cities is a palace complex. At Ecbatana all that remains

of such a complex are some column bases inscribed with the name of Artaxerxes II (Great King between 404 and 358 BC); the rest of the material from the site dates to later periods (Boucharlat 2005: 253–254). More complete palaces have been discovered at the other sites. At Babylon the so-called *Südburg*, built during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 BC) remained in use during Achaemenid rule (Nielsen 1999: 31–35, 246–248). Another palace was built later on in the fifth century (Haerinck 1973). Likewise a palace was built at Susa during the reign of Darius I (522–486 BC; Potts 1999: 325–373) and at Persepolis a series of palaces were built starting in the late sixth century (Koch 2001: 21–56).

These palaces have been interpreted mainly in light of historical evidence for the Great King's movement, i.e. any palace built between about 550 and 330 BC has been identified as Achaemenid. In the case of the Palace of Darius at Susa this is justifiable, as a trilingual foundation text naming Darius was discovered there (Grillot-Susini 1990). But without this document, and certainly without our broader knowledge of the political situation in this period, this palace would not be taken as evidence for Achaemenid political control of Susa. Architecturally its closest parallels are Mesopotamian (Potts 1999: 334–335). Likewise, the *Südburg* at Babylon, having been built by the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, has no architectural features inherently suggestive of Achaemenid construction. From an archaeological standpoint these palaces could just as easily be indicative of independent, competing polities as of imperial capitals frequented by an itinerant monarch. The interpretation of these palaces is further complicated by the ideology deployed by the Great King. In Babylon, for example, the Great King used the title 'King of Babylon,' and employed Babylonian ideology, such as in the Cyrus Cylinder (Briant 2002: 543–544). The use of Elamite in inscriptions at Susa and Persepolis and in the archives at Persepolis would suggest, if anything, an Elamite cultural hegemony based in Susa, the traditional capital of the earlier Elamite empire.



## *Early Mediaeval Germany*

The Ottonian kings of Early Mediaeval Germany (c. AD 936–1075) practised a form of almost constant itinerant kingship (Bernhardt 1993: 45–70). It began as a procession to celebrate each successive king's coronation, and then continued as a series of visits by the king and his court to various royal monasteries and vassal lords. Unlike the Persian example it did not follow a fixed pattern, and each visit was relatively brief, before the king moved on to another monastery or local court. This itinerancy was a means of coping with the decentralised nature of Ottonian Germany. The vassals were generally quite powerful, and although the king had a special religious status as *rex et sacerdos*, his rule was dependent to a large extent on the cooperation of those vassals. Each successive king had to be elected by the vassals (Arnold 1997: 174–179), and although primogeniture was generally sufficient to secure election, this demonstrates that Ottonian kingship was by no means absolute. To assert his power throughout the kingdom, the king had to appear in person to demonstrate his superior position as king in comparison to the local vassals. Furthermore, rather than relying on written laws, the king ruled by decree, often in response to petitions. The authority of these decrees was derived from their issuance by the king himself.

In the course of their travels the kings stayed at either palaces or monasteries. Unfortunately these monasteries have not been investigated archaeologically in any meaningful way, but the architecture of the Ottonian royal palaces alone demonstrate the structural homologies typical of peer polity interaction. Many Ottonian palaces were characterised by large defensive walls and locations atop high ground (Binding 1996: 150–197). They were also of similar size, except for the palace complex at Aachen (Binding 1996: 72–98), which was Carolingian in date, and according to historical sources the kings spent a majority of their time elsewhere. The geographic distribution of the best surviving examples falls roughly into two large clumps in the eastern (Magdeburg, Gröna, Pöhlde, Werla and Tilleda) and western (Duisburg, Elten, Aachen) parts of the kingdom. These two factors inhibit any identification of a geographic centre of the

mediaeval German state, and in the absence of historical data it would be easy to interpret these palaces as independent, competing centres rather than as a single polity unified by an itinerant ruler.

The above case studies show that the unification resulting from itinerant kingship does not leave the types of archaeological traces expected of such political integration. These cases demonstrate that the structural homologues characteristic of peer polities are present in itinerant kingship as well. Likewise, they call into question the boundaries between such polities which many archaeologists would automatically identify as evidence of peer polity interaction. Turning now to the Chalcolithic Negev we see how a case of what have been interpreted as politically independent peer polities can just as easily be interpreted as centres participating in a system of itinerant kingship.

### *Chalcolithic Negev*

The distribution of sites in the Negev in Israel during the Chalcolithic period (c. 4500–3600 BC) fits a two-tier settlement pattern, which, it has been argued, is consistent with chiefdom-level societies, and chiefly centres have in turn been identified at Ze'elim, Shiqmim, Horvat Beter, Nevatim, Gerar Hay, Gilat, and Abu Hof (Levy and Alon 1987: fig. 4.37). Weighted Thiessen polygons have been used to model territorial boundaries between these centres. Furthermore, on the basis of the distribution of copper 'prestige goods' (especially standards), and of the perceived production sites of these goods, it has been argued that these centres engaged in peer polity interaction (Levy and Shalev 1989), implying they were politically independent of each other. The territorial boundaries determined by means of Thiessen polygons are converted into political boundaries (Levy 1986: 99–100).

This evidence for independent, competing chiefdoms in the Chalcolithic Negev, however, is also consistent with itinerant kingship. The area in question is quite small: the greatest distance between any two of the centres is 35km. In comparison with Hawai'i, this is less than half the distance across the island alone, and thus only a fraction of the

distance travelled by Kamehameha as part of his chiefly itineration. Also, the copper standards which have been found at various sites throughout the region all have a distinctive twisted design; their wide distribution has been interpreted as evidence for chiefly exchange, but can as easily be interpreted as the dissemination of a single ideology. So the articulation of the territorial boundaries of these centres is to some extent specious and arbitrary, and the leap from interrelated yet decentralised centres to politically independent territorial entities is not necessarily sound.

## Conclusion

The archaeological resemblance of peer polities to itinerant kingship has important ramifications for the archaeological study of political boundaries. If the same data can be interpreted as either politically independent polities engaged in competition and other forms of interaction, or as a single polity ruled by means of itinerant kingship, then political boundaries defined archaeologically need to be rethought. Current methodologies are based on implicit core-periphery models, wherein political boundaries represent the extent of a given core's political influence or power. Political institutions, however, operate on a different scale temporally and geographically from the economic and social processes that produce the majority of the material we find archaeologically. Thus, we need to develop a better understanding of the archaeological correlates specific to different political institutions, and in turn define political boundaries based on those processes. As the example of itinerant kingship demonstrates, current approaches tie political institutions to certain material correlates that may have nothing to do with the political situation on the ground.

As an avenue of future research we propose developing a better understanding of the archaeological correlates of mobile cores, such as itinerant kingship. As has been shown in the case studies, itinerant kingship represents real integration of individual centres in a way that is not immediately recognisable through current archaeological methodology. Further research into the type of effects that itinerant kingship, and mobile cores more generally, have will reveal the limitations of current

approaches and provide possible alternative frameworks of analysis. Though mobile cores may not leave traces that have been identified as such, they do cause recognisable distortions in patterns of material culture which can show us where we should be looking. In this respect the historical record is an invaluable tool for improving approaches to the archaeological definition of political boundaries.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Seth Button, Tom Landvatter, Chris Ratté, and Charis Boke for their feedback and suggestions on a draft of this paper. As always any errors in logic or presentation that remain are the fault of the authors. This paper is dedicated to the memory of our friend and colleague, Traianos Gagos.

## References

- Arnold, B. 1997. *Medieval Germany, 500–1300: A Political Interpretation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Bang, P.F. 2008. *The Roman Bazaar: A Comparative Study of Trade and Markets in a Tributary Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bernhardt, J.W. 1993. *Itinerant Kingship and Royal Monasteries in Early Medieval Germany, c. 936–1075* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought 21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Binding, G. 1996. *Deutschen Königspfalzen von Karl dem Großen bis Friedrich II. (765 – 1246)*. Darmstadt: Primus Verlag.
- Boucharlat, R. 2005. Iran. In Briant, P. and Boucharlat, R. (eds.), *L'Archéologie de l'Empire Achéménide: Nouvelles Recherches* (Persika 6). Paris: De Boccard, 221–292.
- Briant, P. 2002. *From Cyrus to Alexander: History of the Persian Empire*. Trans. Daniels, P.T. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
- D'Arcy, P. 2003. Warfare and state formation in Hawaii: The limits on violence as a means of political consolidation. *Journal of Pacific History* 38: 29–52.
- Earle, T. 1997. *How Chiefs Come to Power: The Political Economy in Prehistory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Flannery, K. 1999. Process and agency in early state formation. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 9: 3–21.
- Geertz, C. 1983. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Grillot-Susini, F. 1990. Les textes du fondation du palais de Suse. *Journal Asiatique* 278: 213–222.
- Haerinck, E. 1973. Le palais achéménide de Babylone. *Iranica Antiqua* 10: 108–132.
- Koch, H. 2001. *Persepolis: Glänzende Hauptstadt des Perserreichs*. Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern.
- Kolb, M.J. 1994. Monumental grandeur and the rise of religious authority in precontact Hawai'i. *Current Anthropology* 34: 521–547.
- Levy, T.E. 1986. Archaeological sources for the study of Palestine: The Chalcolithic period. *Biblical Archaeologist* 49: 82–108.
- Levy, T.E., and Alon, D. 1987. Settlement patterns along the Nahal Beersheva-Lower Nahal Besor: Models of subsistence in the northern Negev. In Levy, T.E. (ed.), *Shiqmim I: Studies Concerning Chalcolithic Societies in the Northern Negev Desert, Israel (1982–1984)* (BAR International Series 356). Oxford: B.A.R., 45–138.
- Levy, T.E., and Shalev, S. 1989. Prehistoric metalworking in the southern Levant: Archaeometallurgical and social perspectives. *World Archaeology* 20: 352–372.
- Ma, J. 2003. Peer polity interaction in the Hellenistic age. *Past and Present* 180: 9–39.
- Matthews, R. 2003. *The Archaeology of Mesopotamia: Theories and Approaches*. London: Routledge.
- Nielsen, I. 1999. *Hellenistic Palaces: Tradition and Renewal* (Studies in Hellenistic Civilization 5). Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Parker, B.J. 2006. Towards an understanding of borderland processes. *American Antiquity* 71: 77–100.
- Potts, D.T. 1999. *The Archaeology of Elam: Formation and Transformation of an Ancient Iranian State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Renfrew, C. 1986. Introduction: Peer polity interaction and socio-political change. In Renfrew, C., and Cherry, J.F. (eds), *Peer Polity Interaction and Socio-Political Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–18.

- Renfrew, C., and Cherry, J.F. (eds). 1986. *Peer Polity Interaction and Socio-Political Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Root, M.C. 2000. Imperial ideology in Achaemenid Persian art: transforming the Mesopotamian legacy. *Bulletin of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 35: 19–27.
- Tuplin, C. 1998. The seasonal migration of Achaemenid kings: A report on old and new evidence. In Brosius, M. and Kuhrt, A. (eds), *Studies in Persian History: Essays in Memory of David M. Lewis* (Achaemenid History 11). Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 63–114.